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# *Training Tomorrow's Professional Filmmakers*

**by David E Elkins**

**W**hen you think of film schools, the first ones that come to mind are AFI, USC, UCLA and NYU. Start adding NCSA to this list. Winston Salem NC is home to one of the newest film schools in the country. Only 6 years old, the North Carolina School of the Arts School of Filmmaking is already a state-of-the-art facility ready to nourish tomorrow's professional filmmakers.

Since 1965 the North Carolina School of the Arts has been training students for careers in the arts. It is presently composed of five arts schools: Dance, Design & Production, Drama, Filmmaking, and Music. When former Governor Terry Sanford first proposed that the state establish a



performing arts school, no one could predict that this school would one day be known as one of the best. The School is now one of 16 campuses in the University of North Carolina system.

The most recent addition to this arts conservatory is the School of Filmmaking. In the 1970s former NCSA Chancellor Robert Ward began discussing the possibility of adding a film school to the campus. The University Board of Governors granted permission to plan for a film school but these plans were put on hold until 1990 when Chancellor Alex Ewing



reopened the discussion. On March 6, 1992 the UNC Board of Governors approved the establishment of the School of Filmmaking at NCSA.

The first dean of the school was Sam L Grogg who was appointed in January 1993. Mr Grogg's academic background included graduate studies

and a PhD in popular culture and film from Bowling Green University. He served as head of National Education Programs for the American Film Institute from 1974-1979. He has also executive produced several theatrical motion pictures, including *The Trip to Bountiful*.

The school was first set up in a converted laundry building with offices and a screening room. Various other buildings on or near the campus were used for classroom and stage space. The first class of 55 students enrolled at the school in September 1993. Also that year the North Carolina General Assembly introduced a bill to appropriate the necessary funds to construct a facilities complex. The official groundbreaking for the permanent home of the school, the "Studio Village," took place in November 1995.

The School of Filmmaking stresses the collaborative nature of filmmaking and the necessity of working as a team member, all within a rigorous conservatory atmosphere. While detailed individual instruction is offered in

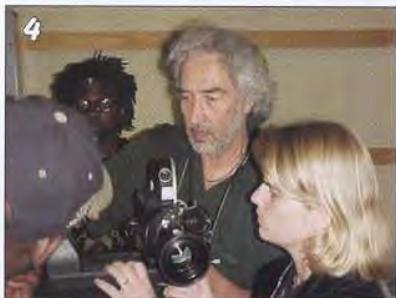


specific areas, the School hopes to create the "complete filmmaker." This individual should be a storyteller of unusual vision who knows how to use and value all the components that are essential to the creation of a motion picture or a TV program. This goal is aided by in-depth instruction in film production, history, theory and criticism, along with practical advice on getting work and succeeding professionally.

The current program focuses on directing, producing, screenwriting, editing, cinematography or production design. After completing the four-year

undergraduate program, which includes general studies in the humanities and sciences, the student earns a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Filmmaking. The school also offers a College Arts Diploma Program. All film classes in the diploma program are identical to those taken for the degree.

At the heart of the program is the master/apprentice approach to training. Experienced mentors work one-on-one with students to develop the talents and skills necessary for a professional career. The faculty consists of working professionals who have established careers and continue



to work in their chosen areas. The work of the faculty at the School of Filmmaking has won or been nominated for Academy Awards, Emmy Awards, Cannes Film Festival Awards, Writers Guild of America Awards, Cable ACE Awards and many others. In addition to the full time resident faculty, students have the opportunity to meet with a variety of guest artists from within the filmmaking community. These professionals are brought in as part of a particular class or for the entire school as a whole to share their professional experiences. Some past guest artists include Robert Wise,



Elmer Bernstein, Wynn Thomas, Spike Lee, Kathy Bates, Ted Tally, Jonas Rosenfield and Kevin Reynolds.

The conservatory setting of the school requires that each student must interview for admission and only the most promising students are accepted. Continuation in the program is by



“invitation only.” Students are invited to continue not only based on their grades for both arts and general studies classes, but also based on their professional and creative skills, along with their ability to interact within the school community.

The film curriculum is currently structured so that general-studies classes are held in the morning and film classes in the afternoon and evening. Most production work outside of class is done on weekends. During the first two years of the program, students are completely immersed in all aspects of the production process. Class size during this



**1)** Cinematography students Bruce Cole & Alex Anderson being shown the Ronford fluid head by faculty member Robert E. Collins. **2)** Cinematography students attending a lecture by Bill Hines SOC. **3)** Bruce Cole setting up an Arriflex 16S camera on the Ronford fluid head, with Robert E. Collins. **4)** Bruce Cole, instructor

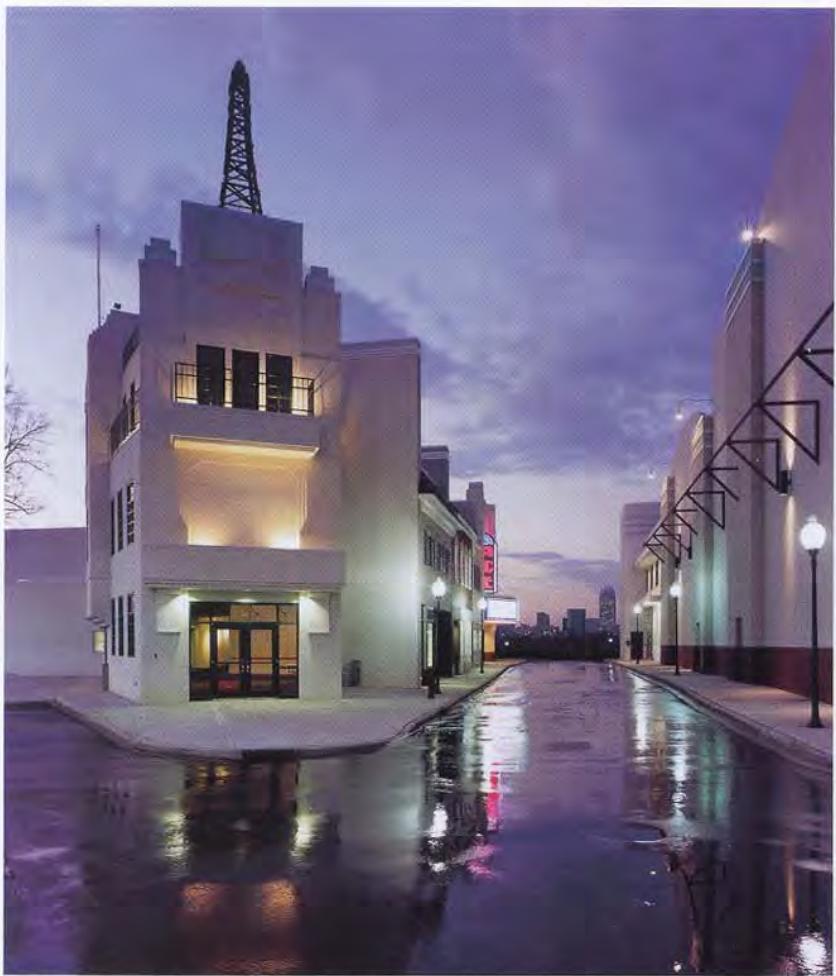


time is usually 15–20 students. The students write, produce, direct, design, shoot and edit a variety of film and video projects during the first two years. They learn every aspect of filmmaking, from pre-production planning and budgeting to actual production of their film, and finally post production, where it all comes together in the editing process. At the end of the second year, students must declare their area of specialization.

Completed dedication is required at the School since students participate in lectures, workshops, screenings, production meetings, crew assignments (on the stages and ➤



Robert E. Collins and Alex Anderson discussing the operation of the camera and fluid head. **5)** Cinematography faculty member David E. Elkins SOC explaining the principles of focus pulling with student Matt Petrosky operating the Arriflex 16SR3 camera. **6)** Cinematography student Brian Girecky operating the camera while Parker Garrett pulls focus. Alex Anderson and John Kelly are seen in the background. **7)** Bill Hines SOC explaining to cinematography students the proper operation of the Arriflex gear head. **8)** David E. Elkins SOC pulls focus while Bruce Cole practices working with the gear head. **9)** Parker Garrett practices with the gear head while Kenny Wilson pulls focus.



Studio Village, North Carolina School of the Arts

on location) and professional internships. During the third and fourth years of study, students must obtain a professional internship outside of school with a company involved in film or video production. The internship is a requirement of the program and the students receive course credit for the successful completion of this internship.

The main goal of the conservatory setting is to give the students training that is consistent with what they will encounter in the profession. The School of Filmmaking facilities provide that. In September 1997 the School officially moved into its new Studio Village which is a multi-purpose complex, housing production, post-production and exhibition facilities. It was designed to be a fully functioning motion picture studio. In

addition, it provides a "back lot environment" where students can film exterior scenes in which a variety of looks can be achieved. The buildings of the Studio Village are built along a "Main Street" and fashioned in several different architectural styles.

On one side of the Main Street is the Production/Post-Production complex which consists of three sound stages varying in size from 2,500 to 8,000 square feet for shooting film or video productions, a recording stage, a mixing stage, an ADR/Foley stage where sound effects can be created, and film and video editing rooms along with production offices for staff and students. The Recording Stage can be used for recording scores and original music for film productions and is capable of hosting an entire 100 piece orchestra. Nearby is the newly com-

pleted Main Instructional Facility that resembles a period-style brick high school. This building houses faculty offices, two small studios, a computer lab, classrooms, a faculty lounge and a still photo processing lab.

On the other side of Main Street is the Exhibition Complex. This complex consists of the Film Archives along with three motion picture theaters designed to exhibit all formats of film and video—16mm, 35mm, 70mm in Academy, Widescreen and CinemaScope formats. The largest of the three theaters can seat 288 people with the two smaller theaters having seats for approximately 90 people each. Part of the Exhibition complex is a climate-controlled storage facility for the school's impressive film and video archive collection. The origin and still the core of the NCSA film archives is the Raymond J Regis Collection, which contains approximately 7,000 feature films. The School of Filmmaking Moving Image Archives was established in 1994 and now contains more than 30,000 feature films, 17,000 trailers and 9,000 shorts and documentaries. With recent acquisitions, the School of Filmmaking currently has a film archives second only in size to that of the Library of Congress. It is the largest film archives of any film school in the world. And the films in the archives don't just sit in storage. Each week approximately 15 films are screened for NCSA film students in the three theaters. As stated by current School of Filmmaking Dean Dale Pollock, "The opportunity for our students to see the great masterworks of cinema presented in their original form is unparalleled."

Students also have access to professional production and post-production equipment for filming and editing their film and video projects. The production equipment currently includes Arriflex 16SR2 and 16SR3 film cameras, Sony Beta SP video cameras, JVS S VHS video cameras, a complete grip package, complete lighting packages with Arriflex and Mole Richardson lighting instruments, Mini Panther and Super Panther dollies, a 1 ton grip truck, a  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton  $\Rightarrow$

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OmniMix Studio in Studio Village, NCSA

camera truck; two crew vans and one 4x4 pickup truck. The post-production facilities currently include new digital editing platforms using Final Cut Pro, an ADR/Foley Stage, SSL OmniMix Digital Mixing Console, two LightWorks non linear editing suites, three SSL ScreenSound digital audio editing suites, and five Avid non linear editing suites including one AVID Media Composer, one AVID Film Composer and three AVID MCX suites.

Some additional features of the Studio Village complex include dressing rooms for actors, equipment storage facilities, a full size loading dock, outdoor pool for shooting water shots, high-amperage power distribution boxes provided for shooting exteriors within the Studio Village, water pipes routed to roofs to provide water for outdoor rain scenes, and an underwater tank.

In April 1998 the School of Filmmaking held its formal dedication ceremonies for the Studio Village. Leaders of state and local government and private and corporate benefactors of the school as well as respected members of the film industry attended the three day celebration. The highlight of the dedication was a tribute to

legendary filmmaker Robert Wise, director of *The Sound of Music* and *West Side Story*. Keynote speaker Jack Valenti, chairman and chief executive officer of the Motion Picture Association of America, said, "I believe that what is happening here ought to be the model for other states around this country." This statement reaffirmed what everyone at the North Carolina School of the Arts had known since the Studio Village began to take shape. This is a special school, a unique school.

In January 1999 Dale Pollock was named the new dean of the School of Filmmaking. Mr Pollock's background includes serving as chief film critic and box-office analyst for *Daily Variety* and later as chief entertainment correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*. While working at the *Times*, he researched and wrote *Skywalking*, the best selling biography of *Star Wars* creator George Lucas. A new edition was recently published by Da Capo Press. In 1985 he joined the David Geffen Company as a development executive and in 1986 joined A&M Films, where he was appointed president in 1990. Mr Pollock has produced 12 feature films including *A Midnight Clear*, *Blaze*, *House of*

Cards, Mrs Winterbourne and Set It Off. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Producers Guild of America.

In his welcoming message Dean Pollock wrote, "Building on the vision of founding Dean Sam L Grogg, we plan to make the School of Filmmaking the top conservatory film school in the world. Our students will enjoy hands-on production training and experience from the moment they begin their studies in our four year undergraduate program. More importantly, they will learn the social, cultural and moral perspectives of film, and how cinema fits into a historical and theoretical context. Building on my experience as a producer of 12 theatrical feature films, I plan to expand the scope and detail of what we teach at the School of Filmmaking, but our strongest resource will always be our students. We want the brightest, most creative and most ambitious young filmmakers to emerge from the School of Filmmaking, prepared to take their place as the cinematic voice of the 21st century."

Recently, Randy Benson, a 1997 graduate of the school, won the Student Academy Award for Best Documentary for his film *Man and Dog*, which was produced and shot while he was a student at the school. And judging by the recent third and fourth year films produced by the students, there will be many more awards won by these students in the future.

For more information about the School of Filmmaking, call (336) 770-1330 or check the web site at [www.ncarts.edu/film](http://www.ncarts.edu/film).



*About the author:* David E Elkins is a Filmmaker Residence in Cinematography and is also Chairman of the Cinematography Department at NCSA School of Filmmaking. He is a member of the SOC and International Cinematographers Guild Local 600. He has worked since 1985 as an Assistant Cameraman and as a

Camera Operator on a variety of feature films, TV series, music videos and commercials.

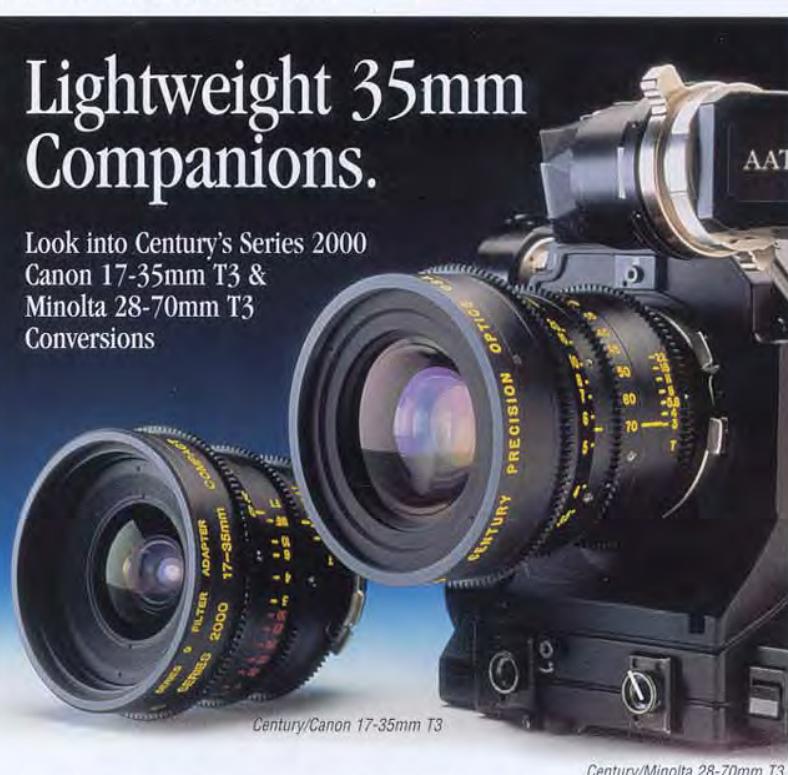
His two books, *The Camera Assistant's Manual* and *Camera Terms and Concepts*, published by Focal Press, are used throughout the world by beginning and professional filmmakers. He is currently working on the third edition of *The Camera Assistant's Manual* which is scheduled for publication in late 2000. You may contact him at [camdave@aol.com](mailto:camdave@aol.com).

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